

# Warrior-based PT

Story and Photos by Dr. Ed Thomas

**I**t has been said that those who fail to learn from the past are destined to repeat it. Those words may ring true for physical readiness training in the Army, since the doctrine team at the U.S. Army Physical Fitness School at Fort Benning, Ga., is currently delving into the past to improve the fitness of today's soldiers.

Current PRT doctrine was created in the early 1980s at the Fort Benjamin Harrison, Ind., Family Support Center. When the USAPFS moved to Fort

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Benning in 1992, the PRT focus began shifting to the 21st-century battlefield.

"Current PRT doctrine is 20 years old and obsolete," said Frank Palkoska, USAPFS chief of doctrine. "Infantry leaders want training that will prepare soldiers for the battlefield. The USAPFS favors a warrior orientation over the health-promotion model of the 1980s, and we're happy to see the increased demand for a shift. We're ready for the challenge."

To reshape PRT for the future, the doctrine team first revisited the past. "We've studied older Army PRT models developed before the early 1980s," said instructional systems

specialist Steve VanCamp. "The 1946 and 1957 doctrines have much to offer. There were also some highly evolved systems of warrior-based physical training between 1860 and 1920. Even some earlier European and Asian physical training systems look useful."

Although the APFT is often the central focus of unit PRT, the fitness school wants soldiers to realize that it's not the final goal. "Push-ups, sit-ups and a two-mile run are only a few basic and isolated components of fitness," said USAPFS commandant COL Steve Cellucci. "The final standard for combat physical readiness is functional fitness."

"Functional fitness for soldiers includes agility, balance, coordination and numerous other physical parameters that translate into mission-essential task-list capabilities," said SSG Richard Holladay, a USAPFS instructor. "The APFT does not measure a soldier's ability to move well on the battlefield."

If a soldier can move efficiently, functional battlefield fitness is within reach."

**(Left)** Army rangers use inversion boots to decompress and mobilize their spines. **(Below)** Walking sticks are used to make a field-expedient stretcher in order to evacuate a "casualty."







The fitness school is even looking at proper posture as a way to enhance soldier fitness. "Poor posture and muscular imbalance are associated with impaired motor skills," said CPT Danny McMillian, a USAPFS physical therapist. "The Army stresses military bearing, but correct posture is less a part of that formula than it should be. Many soldiers do PRT in the morning and then ignore their posture for the rest of the day."

Cellucci explained that motor-skills training also requires rational progression, variety and precision. "Leaping, climbing, throwing, crawling, kicking, striking, tumbling, balancing and other motor skills must be thoroughly mastered if they are to reshape a body and become a learned response," he said. "We must all become better examples if any great leaps forward in the area of functional fitness are to be realized."

VanCamp, who has been with the USAPFS for more than 15 years, thinks motor skills and functional fitness haven't been given the attention they deserve. "Motor-skills training was highly developed in Army PRT doctrine in the late 1800s. A gymnasium built at the turn of the century was in many ways superior to our modern facilities," he said. "Almost everything we do in our gyms today is on the ground. A more rational PRT program will include ropes, ladders, climbing grids, vaulting platforms and other devices designed to teach complex motor skills."

According to Cellucci, structured physical training in schools was sacrificed to sports and games around 1920. "By the 1950s there were signs that America was growing clumsy and unbalanced. There was an initial phase of denial, and American physical educators have since been slow to face the crisis. Army recruits fresh from the civilian sector generally have poor posture and motor patterns that impede training and lead to injuries," he said.

Current PRT doctrine falls short in the area of motor skills, and the misguided tendency to train primarily for the PT test still keeps many soldiers from developing functional fitness, said Holladay. "As we reshape PRT for the next century, it simply must include rational motor-skills training," he added.

In order to help reshape PRT for the future, a team of noncommissioned officers from the 75th Ranger Regiment recently joined forces with the USAPFS for a month-long field test of some new combat physical readiness training being developed at Fort Benning for the infantry.

The rangers tested six new PRT aids. Medicine balls and high-quality jump ropes were used for basic plyometric training. Mass dumbbell drills were developed for muscular endurance. The walking stick was tested for flexibility drills and a variety of other combat functions. War Clubs were used to enhance shoulder girdle flexibility, coordination and speed. Inversion boots were introduced for total body decompression and mobilization. These and other on-the-ground



**Rangers use walking sticks during a "partner stretch" exercise. The event was part of the month-long field test of new combat physical fitness training ideas undertaken at Fort Benning.**

activities were then linked to combatives and climbing.

"The doctrine team has developed some very powerful training concepts," said Cellucci. "We wanted to see how easily the rangers could learn and teach them. They exceeded our expectations and helped us fine-tune the doctrine."

"We have over a century of modern U.S. Army PRT history to guide us," said VanCamp. "Yesterday's PRT has much to offer the future, and rangers have demonstrated that today's soldier is capable of meeting the standard."

For more information concerning Army PRT, visit the USAPFS website at [www-benning.army.mil/usapfs](http://www-benning.army.mil/usapfs). □



**Retired Gurkha soldier Dr. Maung Gyi leads rangers in knife practice. War clubs and walking sticks also came into play during the field test.**